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Desertification, migration, and herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria: rethinking the ungoverned spaces thesis

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ABSTRACT

While previous studies have focused on how political and economic factors fuel herder-farmer conflicts, there is a dearth of knowledge on how desertification-induced migration amidst ungoverned spaces affect herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. Using data from qualitative dominant mixed method, this study interrogates how desertification-induced migration and state failure to provide security governance affect herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. It argued that poor security governance escalates the southward migration of herders and contributes to the intensification of herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. These conflicts endanger livelihoods, fuel population displacements, and undermine human security. The study concludes that effective security governance amidst increased desertification in Northern Nigeria presents an opportunity for regulating southward migration of herders, mitigating herder-farmer conflicts, and promoting human security in Nigeria.

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KEYWORDS Desertification; herder-farmer conflicts; ungoverned spaces; human security; migration

Introduction

Since 1999 that marked the return of Nigeria to civil rule, the country has been under the attacks of armed groups in different regions. While the Avengers are ravaging the Nigeria Delta region, Boko Haram terrorists have destroyed the political economy of the North East region and armed robbery and kidnapping are prevalent in the Southern region.[1] Meanwhile, herder-farmer conflicts have engulfed every region in Nigeria, especially the North Central region.[2] Although herder-farmer conflict is as old as the history of

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Nigeria, the cycle of violence worsened since 2011. Scholars have attributed some of the reasons for these conflicts to climate change. Environmental changes engender loss of livelihood and this is an important driver of both internal and external migration across the globe.[3] In Nigeria for instance, herder-farmer conflicts have been linked to diminishing natural resources engendered by climate change.[4] As one of the drivers underpinning the conflict between herders and farmers, desertification is a feature that characterizes most parts of sub-Saharan Africa.[5] Indeed, the impacts of desertification have been far-reaching in Nigeria in that about one-fifth of its total land spaces are encroached by the desert.[6] Desertification of Nigeria's Sahel region is undercutting the availability of pastures and natural water sources which are central to survival of livestock. Adrian Blomfield noted that some states in Northern Nigeria have up to 75% of grassland encroached by desert, creating fertile land scarcity.[7] The scarcity caused by desertification in northern Nigeria's Sahel region has driven herders and livestock to the Southern parts of the country in search of grassland.[8] This southward movement of the herders and their livestock has intensified herder-farmer conflicts, especially during the last two decades, especially in Central Nigeria with an unprecedented number of casualties.[9] Blomfield associated the cause of the conflict to 'more frequent droughts, the disappearance of water sources and attacks by Boko Haram [which] have combined to drive herders and their herds into Nigeria's fertile central farmlands, the country's so-called Middle Belt – where much of the population are Christians.'[10] The southward trends of pastoralist migration added to the already densely populated central and southern regions of Nigeria, closing in on the available but limited agricultural resources.[11]

Herder-farmer conflicts in North Central Nigeria have caused the death of almost 4000 people as of 2018.[12] The records of the destruction of farms and other material resources are unquantifiable. While the farmers have attributed the conflict to the tendency of cattle to damage their crops and pollution of water sources, the herders argued that rustling, cattle theft, and barricade of traditional grazing are the major drivers of the conflicts.[13] Despite the counterpoise of accusations, desertification underlies the competition between herders and farmers for economic spaces for survival.[14] Indeed, desertification is a major but often neglected driver of cyclical attacks between the two groups.[15]

In an atmosphere of ungoverned spaces, the violent conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria has thrived, primarily in the Savannah region and partly in the rainforest areas. The trend and degree of these violent conflicts have attracted global attention. For instance, the Institute for Economics and Peace observed that herder-farmer conflicts have become the fourth most dangerous terror group in the world after the Islamic State of

Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram.[16] In 2016, Nigeria lost over 14 USD billion as a result of herdsmen and farmers.[17]

While studies have shown that political and economic factors promote the cyclical conflicts between herders and farmers across Africa,[18] there is a dearth of knowledge on how these conflicts thrive in the ungoverned spaces in Northern Nigeria amidst increased desertification.

Whereas violent non-state actors, extremists and criminal gangs often exploit the unintended vacuum created by ineffective security governance to advance sectarian interests and threaten national sovereignty,[19] investigations of herder-famer conflicts tended to gloss over situating the conflicts within the logic of ungoverned spaces amidst increased desertification. This study underscores the implications of the dialectics of ungoverned spaces in herder-farmer conflicts and how it affects human security in Nigeria. The remainder of the study is organized into the following subsections: methodology; review of literature on desertification, migration and herders-farmer conflicts; theoretical reflections on ungoverned spaces thesis; government response conundrum to herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria; desertification and dialectics of herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria's ungoverned spaces and conclusion.

Methodology

This article is predicated on how desertification and migration in ungoverned spaces affect herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. The study utilized the qualitative dominant mixed methods approach comprising 12 focus group discussions (FGDs), field observation, rapid review of available national policy documents, reports of international development agencies, and other secondary literature on farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria. The participants in the FGDs were the major stakeholders including village heads, victims of farmer-herder conflicts, leaders of Myetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, and security personnel in the Lake Chad region as well as in Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Taraba states, where farmer-herders conflicts have been most recurring. The FGD were conducted in the most conflict-affected local governments within the study area. Each of the FGD comprised 6–10 persons. Hence, there were a total of 104 participants in the FGD. The FGDs were used to generate information on how desertification-induced migration in the ungoverned spaces affects herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. Data were collected between June and July, 2020. We used simple percentage and frequency tables for analysis. The final manuscript was subjected to member check by the authors in order to enhance the credibility and validity of qualitative interpretations.[20]

Review of literature on desertification and herders-farmer conflicts in ungoverned spaces

Desertification refers to the process of reducing or eliminating the land's ecological capacity which may ultimately lead to desert-like conditions.[21] It is also defined as the dilapidation of soil which has come about as a result of climatic and human factors in dry, semi-dry, and dry sub-humid areas. Figure 1 shows the states in Nigeria affected by desertification in Nigeria.

Desertification leads to the marginality and degradation of arable land.[22] Desertification has been linked to natural and human causes or activities altering the climate.[23] Natural causes such as the quantity and quality of solar radiation and the cosmological position of the earth as well as human causes such as urbanization, industrialization, deforestation, burning of fossil, water pollution, among others have mutually reinforced climate change and soil degradation which desertification is the consequence.[24] Other factors responsible for desertification include the loss of local political authority, lack of economic structure, and the nonexistence of social organizations which limits the ability of local people to deal with the issue of resource depletion.[25]

In Nigeria, desertification has shrunk spaces of competitive resources for agrarian and pastoralist activities. Land and water resources become competitive and the contestations over them become violent as with the case between herders and farmers.[26] The threats posed by desertification in

Figure 1. Frontier states affected by desertification.
Source: International Crisis Group, 'Herders against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict'.

different countries in the Sahel and Sahara are enormous and have direct implications on human security, particularly the Fulani herders, who by their nature engage in transhumant pastoral practice either on a temporary or permanent basis.[27] They constitute a sub-set of the population that have primarily the raising of livestock as their occupation and engages in nomadic (random) or semi-nomadic (planned) grazing practices. The far-reaching effects of desertification include poverty and hunger, unemployment, forced migration, and violent conflict, among others.[28]

The herders and farmers have engaged themselves violently over access to land and water resources. Scholars have attributed the conflict between these groups to climate variability and scarcity of land resources in sub-Saharan Africa.[29] The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification revealed that over 80% of armed conflict impacting society has occurred in fragile dry environments implicated by desertification. The consequences of desertification have occurred in countries with poor economic and ineffective political regimes that cannot satisfy or respond adequately to demands from the different communities in the regions.[30] The explosiveness of conflict as a result of desertification is heinous because over 80% of the population relies on subsistence economy for survival and livelihoods sustenance.[31] Conflict arising as a result of desertification in sub-Saharan African countries have caused the death of thousands of people, forced many into out-migration, and the displacement of many people from their means of livelihoods.

The conflict between herders and farming population in sub-Saharan African countries have either rendered their governments incapable due to the absence of institutional capacity or political will to deal with the threats for some arduous reasons. In these countries, the conflicts between herders and farmers have fed on diverse reasons and context, creating the atmosphere for the emergence of violent ethnic and/or religious extremism.[32] The frequency of violence and fatalities between the two groups has been high but differs in magnitude across different countries.

In Nigeria the state of Benue has recorded the highest incidence of herder-farmer conflicts and fatalities. While Nigeria recorded 450 incidences with 2827 fatalities, Central African Republic recorded 13 incidences with 218 fatalities and Mali only has 2 incidences with 20 fatalities.[33] Despite the variations in the magnitude of herder-farmer conflicts, the economic, social, and political costs of the conflict have been devastating. African Centre for Strategic Studies corroborates that the problem of desertification for people within the Sahel region is widespread and it is getting worse each passing day.[34] For people in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia, the impacts of desertification have given rise to over 12.8 million people suffering from food insecurity, vulnerability to disease outbreaks, clandestine conflict, and the emergence of religious extremist groups undermining and ransacking state's authority.[35]

Nevertheless, Okwudiba Nnoli speculated in the 1990s that desertification causes forced migration of ecological refugee as a result of famine and this leads to inter-state conflicts in West Africa. However, that such conflict dynamic has not occurred, desertification has produced intra-state conflict in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, among others, within the spaces where the impacts of the state in terms of economic and social infrastructures are not felt remarkably.[36] In other words, the conflicts between herders and farmers in Nigeria have occurred in localities where the authority of the state is governmentally absent or least present. Because of government failing to extend its reach governmentally in these spatial areas, growing social exclusion, poverty, human rights violation, food insecurity, endemic diseases, illiteracy, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons have characterised human conditions, which construes the psychological leaning of the people and affect the human social relations in communities across the country.

Reflections on ungoverned spaces: a theoretical perspective

This study adopts the ungoverned spaces thesis as a theoretical framework. Ungoverned spaces relate to spaces, both physical and non-physical that are outside the control of the government.[37] However, the presence of ungoverned spaces may not necessarily imply the absence of governance by the state but the government may deliberately be unwilling to control, exercise effective governance because of deficient political will, inadequate government capacity, lack of penetration of governance, resentment, and intractability of conflict, or restrictive models of behaviour in society.[38]

As Keister maintained, for the ungoverned spaces to continue to prevail depends largely on the state's capacity and willingness to exercise sovereign power against the factors motivating the emergence of groups constituting existential threats to the country.[39] In a country where economic and political scopes are weakened by social forces, it gives uncontrolled opportunities and the upper hand to armed groups to compete and contest for power to control a certain space within the state.[40] Any non-state actor group that takes over the control of certain territorial spaces set up rules or conditions for resolving the challenges they pose to the state. In some cases, those who do not recognize them to be legitimate suffer serious consequences, which include incarceration and violence against the people.

In the first place, no space within the frontiers of a sovereign state is to be out of the reach of the government that legitimately possesses the monopoly of the use of force as well as other resources necessary for preventing ungoverned spaces coming under the control of violent non-state actors. However, ungoverned spaces become incubated and sustained when the state's authority is effectively challenged by non-state actors to the point it is

Table 1. Conditions necessitating the exploitation of ungoverned spaces.

Necessitating Conditions	Explanatory Context of Ungoverned Spaces
Lack of state penetration	Ungoverned spaces emerge as a result of the absence of state's structures within a geographical location due to lack of capacity or the absence of political will to penetrate those spaces by providing public goods to undermine the emergence of ungoverned spaces, both tangible and intangible within a given territory, which is taken over by violent non-state actors. Ungoverned spaces emerge also when a given group of people within the frontiers of the state have culturally and socially been in confrontation with the government in power based on either the process it came into power was not democratic, or it is opposed based on primordial considerations such as tribalism or religious belief system, as in the case of Muslim Jihadists against democracy, which is seen as inimical to Islam.
Lack of state monopoly of force	Making sense of Weber's concept of the state as the only legal entity with the privilege of the use of force, the state is saddled with enforcing control inside and at the country's borders. The presence of militant non-state actors, such as organized armed groups, criminal activity networks and society with access to weapons, also provides a potential for ungoverned spaces to develop within the state. Ungoverned spaces could emerge as a result of the failure to make use of the monopoly which state has over the use of force, either for lack of capacity or for other considerations that allow the violent non-state actors to exploit either because they are internally supported by internal forces within or outside the political system in the country or because they feel a sense of affiliation with the personality in control of the government of a state based on race, ethnicity or religion to perpetrate violence using criminal networks against other people without the state employing force or any form of condemnation against such groups.
Lack of borders control	The constitutional responsibility to protect citizens and property within its boundaries from internal and external aggression is not negotiable. One of the marked features of lack of border controls is porousness of borders and where border checkpoints exist; illegal human and material assets and weapons are smuggled and proliferated into the country without prevention or prosecution. Certain powerful individuals, usually state actors evade the security checks at the borders by using state vehicles, emblems and authority. Beyond this situation, without effective border control arms groups and criminals adroit at exploiting cross-borders established by local people to penetrate the state with the act of violence against a target object, which could be a people, structure or the state itself.
The level of external interference	Ungoverned spaces become exploited and are used effectively when there is external interference such as support for violent non-state actors from other similar groups in terms of financial, logistical, and human foot-soldiers. The possibility for this to happen is when the state lacks capacity or is unwilling to extend its writs forcefully, or the level of external support it receives is less.
An adequate level of infrastructure	Ungoverned spaces are effectively utilized by restive groups when they have basic infrastructures such as access to communication channels within and outside the group, particularly with other groups of like-mindedness and potential recruits. They also need sources to finance their activities and mobility to facilitate their plans, organization and attacks.
Favourable demographics	Taking advantage of ungoverned spaces depend largely on like-minded groups with a common enemy. In an environment where a population favourable to a violent non-state actor exists, it becomes easy to gain the required support for violence or buy the population into participating in the violence against other groups or the state.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Necessitating Conditions	Explanatory Context of Ungoverned Spaces
Access to sources of income	Ungoverned spaces become veritable when it provides an opportunity for accessing funding, which may be through exaction, abduction for ransom, robbery, taxes generated from the local population within the spaces they control. The violent non-state actors without territorial controlled depend totally on external funding to execute their violence against targets.

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'The Link between "ungoverned Spaces" and Terrorism: Myth or Reality?'

incapable of responding proportionately.[41] Table 1 provides the conditions which necessitate the being of ungoverned spaces in a country. Lloyd asserts that to eliminate ungoverned spaces rests on setting up or maintaining central government power. This is achieved by eliminating non-state actors or intruders threatening the monopoly of the state from exercising its authority and power, enhancing the state's capability, maintaining a fairly legitimate system, and external support.[42] In sub-Saharan Africa, the upsurge of violent non-state actors is compounded by the theoretical construct of the ungoverned spaces conundrum.

Although scholars have argued that the weakness of states is not a sufficient explanation for the presence of violent organizations,[43] and there is no such thing as a power vacuum in which extremist organizations thrive,[44] Clionadh Raleigh and Caitriona Dowd noted that there is a link between ungoverned spaces, state failure, and violence.[45] Thus, ineffective administration creates pockets of ungoverned territories which are being exploited by armed groups, especially in the Sahel region of West Africa[46] and Nigeria.[47] Arguably, climate change can lead to conflict in countries and or regions, which are dependent on agriculture, host politically excluded groups, and have ineffective institutions.[48]

This study argued that the failure of the state to exercise security governance created the favourable environment for herder-farmer conflicts to thrive in Nigeria. The conflicts between herders and farmers have continued for years in many states of Nigeria without any effective control mechanism established by the government to mitigate the threats posed by the conflicts. State failure underlies the emergence of ungoverned spaces and promotes the conflict between the agrarian and pastoralist groups.

In the context of the herder-farmer conflicts across countries in sub-Saharan Africa, governing spatial territorial spaces amounts to threatening their traditional means of livelihoods, which is the essence of their existence. The Fulani ethnic group constitutes over 35 million people scattered from the Sahel to the rainforests across 15 West African countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with than two-third or over 90% of the population practice nomadic pastoralism as a profession. They straddle several countries in West and

Central Africa, following the swing of the seasons.[49] To the Fulani pastoralist population, the use of federal government power is to ensure the continuity of their traditional pastoralist system, otherwise, it constitutes a threat and vehemently must be resisted. This widely held perception among the Fulani ethnic group is motivated by the fact that '[Fulani] pastoralists own approximately 90% of the national herd, estimated at 19.5 million cattle, about 975,000 donkeys, 28,000 camels, 72.5 million goats and 41.3 million sheep. Livestock represents between 20% and 30% of total agricultural production and about 6 to 8% of overall Gross Domestic Production (GDP).'[50]

Moreover, many of the Fulani people in Nigeria believe that other Fulani from any part of sub-Saharan Africa traditionally have a stake in Nigeria and requires that government should protect and enhance their traditional practice of mobile pastoralism. The reason is that Nigeria is perceived to be an estate of their grand-great father, the Islamic jihadist leader Sheik Usman Danfodio.[51] The former military Head of State retired General Muhammadu Buhari (now, president of Nigeria) was quoted stating that 'The Fulani herdsmen are Nigerians and have a right to be here. They carry sticks and not dangerous weapons. If you want peace give them your land.'[52] The perception by the Fulani, including Buhari's assertion has widely been contested among the indigenous farming population across Nigeria.

The indigenous farming ethnic groups across Nigeria expects the government to extend its power to protect them and their means of livelihood – the farmlands and crops from the armed Fulani herders whose aim is to destroy their farms and/or occupy them. Many farmers argue that they are aboriginal to the territories where Fulani herders graze cattle. Any attempt by the government to protect Fulani herders by way of extending its power amount to encouraging the group to annihilate and confiscate their lands. They constitutionally situate their perception that the Fulani herders attacking their communities, destroying their homes, farmlands, and crops, and committing heinous crimes are not indigenous to their respective communities.[53] Through the act of security governance, the government must establish its writ to prevent armed Fulani herders from their communities. Beyond these concerns, the government is expected to respond to other human security challenges that are capable of undermining the security and stability of the country.

The conflict between Fulani herders and farmers in Nigeria should be seen within the wider context of government unwillingness to respond to the challenges bedevilling the Fulani herders and farming population in Nigeria's rural enclaves.[54] The complacency of the federal government in the conflict and to enforce borders control aided the exploitation of the ungoverned spaces created by the government. The Fulani herders from other countries took advantage of the scenario to intrude Nigeria's borders through the northern corridors, not only to seek pasture for

cattle but to also perpetrate violence against farmers in Nigeria. Since the Fulani herders are naturally Muslims, they have exploited their religious identity to tap into religious organization and individuals for support and justification of their actions against the farming population in the savannah belt of Nigeria.[55]

Government response conundrum to herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria

Globally, the authority of the government covers the length and breathes of its territorial spaces, which include the land areas, maritime, and the airspace that is within its definable boundaries. In this context, the jurisdiction of the state's control essentially means the extent to which it is capable of using the monopoly of force visibly manifested in the identified areas, insofar they are within the state's boundaries. With the conflict involving Fulani herders and farmers and the avoidance of the use of power, whether soft or hard power, as a sovereign entity to mitigate the menace indicates that the capacity of government has been undermined in Nigeria. It is worthy of note that ungoverned spaces in the context of Nigeria does not necessarily imply the violent non-state actors are capable of undermining state's capability in terms of security governance. Powerful state actors both in government and out of government can also create, perpetuate, and/or enhance the conditions through which state's capability can be undermined.

To reveal how the state has been overrun by violent non-state actors, various groups representing different sections and interests within Nigeria have contested the state's capability in handling the challenges involving the conflict between Fulani herders and farmers. Besides violent confrontations between the two groups, umbrella organizations such as Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore (MAKH) and the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN) have issued strong-wordy statements to the federal government of Nigeria, clearly indicating in principle the usurping of state's authority. The ethnic groups which suffered Fulani herders' attacks in different states, particularly in Benue, Taraba, and Adamawa states often reacted virulently in reprisal to attacks in the defence of their respective communities.[56]

Reacting to ungovernable spaces created by the complacency of the federal government to deal with the menace, which Fulani herders exploited to attack native ethnic communities, the former Minister of Defence, Lieutenant General Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma (Rtd) stated that there was a collaboration between Fulani herders and the Nigerian army, who aid them to attack farming communities. Due to lack of trust in the army, the communities attacked by the Fulani herders were advised to take to self-defence of their communities and livelihood.[57] In states such as Benue and Taraba where anti-open grazing laws introduced in November 2017 were oppose by Fulani herders. This led to violent

attacks in ruralattacks in rural communities. Many people were killed, means of livelihood destroyed. President Buhari led the federal government to enforce the law or prosecute armed Fulani herdsmen; it was rather soft and in most cases justifying their actions. This made many ethnic communities to resort to self-help strategies by forming militia groups for self-defence since the government can no longer be relied on to protect their lives and properties. Like the Fulani herders, these ethnic militias acquired illegal weapons for defence against any attack on their communities. Rather than condemning, President Buhari justified that the attacks involving the use of AK-47 were not carried out by the Fulani herders, who are known for carrying sticks and matched occasionally but were those from the Sahel recruited during the Libyan conflict.[58] The statement by President Buhari revealed how ungoverned and vulnerable Nigeria borders are, especially in Northern Nigeria, which foreign Fulani herders exploited to attack native farming communities in Nigeria.

Similarly, the Kaduna state Governor, Mallam Nasir El-Rufai claimed that the Fulani herders attacking and killing farming communities in Nigeria were migrants from Cameroon, Mali, Chad, and Senegal, who came back to Nigeria to avenge the killing and rustling of their cattle by Nigerians.[59] For example, the governor also admitted paying money to Fulani herders to pacify them not to continue the violent attacks on the Christian-dominated communities in the southern parts of Kaduna state.[60] As part of the explanation why the federal government failed to prosecute the Fulani herders attacking communities, El-Rufai was accused of sponsoring them; more so that he has been covering attacks carried out by the Fulani herders in several communities in Kaduna state.[61] Local farming communities attacked by Fulani herders, for example in the northern, central, and southern Nigerian states were in non-Muslim communities, signalling that the conflict was targeted at incarcerating and annihilating the non-Muslims to claim their lands after displacing them.

In the attempt to prevent the circle of violence against farmers by the armed Fulani herders, the federal government decided to collaborate with Miyetti Allah to assist them to recover weapons from the headsmen. The farming population accused the federal government of paying Fulani herders to stop the killing across the country, but Mallam Garba Shehu, the special adviser to President Buhari on Media and Publicity, denied the allegation.[62] The Exercise *Ayem A Kpatuma* (Cat Race) and Operation Whirl Stroke instituted by the federal government to recover weapons among other operational guidelines, was not trusted by the farmers who felt it was a tactical operation to disempower them against the fierce Fulani herders to attack. Consequently, the military operation was largely unsuccessful.[63]

As part of the effort to govern the ungoverned Fulani herders, the federal government proposed the establishment of 'cattle colonies' across the 36 states of Nigeria. After much controversy surrounding it, the government adopted the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlements as an alternative, which

was also vehemently condemned by many individuals, groups, and communities within the central and southern parts of Nigeria. Cattle colonies and/or RUGA settlements were to be established across the 36 states of the federation.[64] To the federal government, the establishment of grazing areas will reduce the conflict between Fulani herders and farmers. By establishing grazing reserve to settle Fulani herders, it will enable them to escape from drought and desertification and consequently, lead to an increase in production and market for cattle economy in Nigeria.

However, several non-Fulani communities in which cattle colonies or RUGA settlements were to be established alleged that President Buhari who is ethnically Fulani and Muslim had the intention to 'Islamize' and/or 'Fulanize' Nigeria. Therefore, they were not willing to surrender their 'ancestral land' to a group they consider to ethnic migrants who under the leadership of the Fulani jihadist, Danfodio, conquered the traditional Hausa states in the 19th Century.[65] Nigerians also criticized the government for taking special interest in the Fulani ethnic group which he belongs to, largely known for being nomadic to settle and provide them with all necessary modern facilities without similar interest demonstrated for other ethnic groups which constitute the majority puts together in Nigeria.[66] The ethnic communities challenged the plan of the federal government to prevent the consequences of having their land taken over by the nomadic Fulani migrants. For example, ethnic communities in Kachia local government area of Kaduna state had their lands collected to establish grazing reserves for Fulani herders. Several decades after occupation, the grazing reserves have been turned into sedentary settlements settled by the Fulani migrants.[67] The Arewa Youth under the Coalition of Northern Groups (CNG) ordered the leaders of southern Nigeria to accept RUGA settlement within thirty days while also issued President Buhari thirty days to implement the policy.[68]

The federal government through the National Assembly attempted to pass legislation to establish the National Grazing Reserve Bill in 2016 across the central and southern states in Nigeria but failed because the Land Use Act of 1978 empowers only the state government to regulate ownership, estrange, procure, administer, and manage the land within the respective states.[69] Most state governments rejected such proposals in tandem with the resolve of their people. Amid the controversies over the government planned programme to settle the Fulani herders, the federal government decided to jettison the plan to adopt the National Livestock Transformation Plan (2018–2027), which is yet to be implemented.[70] The conflict between Fulani herders and farmers is far from being resolved, even though it has minimized since the federal government's border closure. There is yet to be any concrete measure taken by the federal government acceptable to all Nigerians to deal with the challenges triggering the Fulani herders and farmers conflict in Nigeria.

Desertification, migration and herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria's ungoverned spaces

Although Nigeria is not the only country bedevilled by desertification prone conflict between Fulani herders and farmers in West Africa or even in Africa, countries such as Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, Chad, South Africa, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Cameroon, and Kenya among others have experienced substantive conflict arising from competition over the scarcity of land and water resources between pastoralists and farmers.[71] However, Nigeria is a major corridor of desertification motivated conflict motorized by climate change and anthropogenic activities. The dialectic motivating Fulani herders and farmers conflict in Nigeria in contemporary time are pastoralist migrant population, majority of the cattle herders belonging to the Fulani ethnic group from the Sahel region of Africa. In West Africa's humid and sub-humid regions, deforestation has taken a toll on about four million hectares of land causing soil depletion annually.[72]

The drive of desertification sweeping through the arid and semi-arid zones of the Sudan and Sahel regions in northern Nigeria covers a land area of 240,900 Km^2 and 20,700 Km^2 respectively. The land area suffering desertification has taken approximately 26.6%, and it is located on latitude 120° N. Although climate change models are yet to reach consensus on what climate change will mean for rainfall projections in West Africa,[73] the variability of rainfall rages from the average of 600–800 mm and a rainy season between 100 and 120 days .[74] These climate change challenges are producing differentiated outcomes globally, regionally, and within countries. In the Lake Chad region for example, Boko Haram, local Fulani herders and Buduma fishermen compete for the control of the agricultural and pastoral front created by the shrinking of the lake. Often these groups make alliances to exert control of the scarce resources in the region.[75] Emeka Obioha observed that within the spatial areas of northern Nigeria located in the arid and semi-arid zones, rainfall variability reinforced by anthropogenic activities threatens the livelihood of the pastoralist and crop farmers, intensify competition for scarce resources, promote herder-farmer conflicts, and undermine food security.[76] Indeed, the rainfall variability and the resulting changes in climatic conditions have given rise to the surge of conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers in Nigeria.

Beyond the explanation of rainfall variability as the cause of herders' migration and conflicts, the growing population of human and livestock heightens the level of scarcity, competition, and conflicts in the region.[77] The influx of livestock from within northern Nigeria and the surrounding countries in North, Central, and West Africa to take advantage of the greener pasture and water provided by the Lake Chad and its environs led to unhealthy agricultural practices, overgrazing, intense fishing activities, and

pollution of the lake.[78] Accompanied by the drought of the 1970s, the lake receded affecting significantly its carrying capacity, which could not any longer meet the demand for both farmers and cattle herders. The shrinking of the Lake Chad basin was further reinforced in the 1980s and 1990s with irrigation farming and water supply development, affecting other supply chains of the Lake Chad Basin.[79] The decline of the Lake Chad basin was gradual but stagy because, in the 1960s, the lake was about 22,000 Km^2, but it now occupies about 1,500 Km^2.[80]

However, the consequences of desertification induced migration are not only felt in the Lake Chad basin, it is experienced across many states in northern Nigeria covering both arid and semi-arid zones. In other northern Nigeria, such as Sokoto, Zamfara, Kano, Kebbi, Jigawa, Katsina, Yobe, and Borno, where mobile pastoralism has remained eminent, the increasing level of desertification has impinged on farming practices. The resultant effects in most of the states have been cattle rustling and conflicts, in which the Fulani herders are the aggressors and indigenous farmers, are the victims of their attacks.[81] The conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers have cut-across the central states and other states in southern Nigeria. The cause of it is southward mobile pastoralism, which the shrinking of the Lake Chad basin has been implicated for reinforcing the surge in the pastoralist migration. The southward migration of the large population of Fulani herders into the guinea savannah to seek alternative means for pastures and water sources for their cattle created a condition where the herders intrude ethnic communities and farmlands. The Fulani herders' unguarded grazing of cattle has given rise to disputes over the destruction of crops and cattle rustling.[82]

In North-East Nigeria, soil degradation, climate variability, and desertification in the Lake Chad Basin have not only undermined the means of survival and livelihood but have also generated resentment against the government, both at the sub-national and national levels for complacency to respond to the changing dynamics of the Lake Chad Basin on which thousands of population depended for employment and livelihood.[83] In the region, such disenchantment and resentment led to irregular migration, serial crimes, criminality, and terrorism. The disruption of livelihoods in the Lake Chad basin has not only affected the relationship between local farmers and pastoralist population but also added to the social and economic challenges that facilitate the recruitment of the disenchanted population into joining extremist groups, especially the Boko Haram. This has been reinforced by the erosion of government legitimacy due to its inability to resolve the challenges bedevilling both herders and farmers.

Forced migration caused by desertification and the rise of a violent groups such as Boko Haram, in part a result of pressure on locally available resources and unhealthy competition among different groups has had consequences on other communities outside the territories the extremist group have

Table 2. Summary of FGDs on the relationship between desertification, migration, and farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria.

Category	Remarks (R)	Frequency of (R)
The relationship between desertification, migration and farmer-herder conflicts	Desertification in the North is distorting livelihoods in Nigeria	82
	Nigerian government have been ineffective in addressing Desertification	90
	Desertification in North fuels Southward migration of herders in Nigeria	91
	Southward migrating herders are often armed	90
	Migration of armed herders fuels herder-farmer conflicts	92
	Farmer-herder conflicts have become more dangerous than Boko Haram	89
	Poor security governance in Nigeria promotes proliferations of arms	93
	Proliferations of arms promotes cattle rustling and theft	61
	Proliferations of arms escalates herder-farmer conflicts	93
	Herder-farmer conflicts escalated after the emergence of President Buhari	93
	Nigeria herdsmen are largely of Fulani ethnic group	88
	Nigerian government is ineffective in handling farmer-herder conflicts	76
	Farmers are the worst hit by the farmer-herder conflicts	85
	State actors are often biased in favour of herders	90
	Non-state actors are often biased in favour of the farmers	71

Source: Fieldwork, 2020.

operated for decades. Although scholars have argued that conflicts in Africa are largely explained by the wider socioeconomic and political context in which parties in conflict are embedded,[84] climate change induced irregular migration of Fulani herders have contributed to intergroup complexities and rivalry for scarce and dwindling land resources in the Savannah areas in Central and Southern Nigeria. Table 2 shows the summary of FGDs on the relationship between desertification, migration and farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria

The conflict between the herders and farmers in Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Adamawa, Kaduna, and Nasarawa state has emerged as a consequence of the struggle for grazing land and sources of water supplies for cattle.[85] However, the conflict between herders and farmers has also been evident in other states across Nigeria with varying degree of fatalities. The International Crisis Group (ICC) in September 2017 revealed that a survey of 'reports suggests fatalities may have reached an annual average of more than 2,000 from 2011 to 2016, for some years exceeding the toll from the Boko Haram insurgency.'[86] On the other hand, Amnesty International reported on 17 December 2018 that the conflict between Fulani herders and farmers has caused the death of at least 3,641 since 2016, but 57% of the people killed occurred in 2018.[87] Table 3 shows some reported attacks on farmers by the armed Fulani herders in Nigeria.

Indeed, herder-farmer conflicts have killed thousands of people, displaced tens of thousands from their communities; properties worth millions of dollars destroyed or looted, homes and crops burnt or destroyed, and livestock killed or rustled, especially in Benue State.[88] Figure 2 shows a picture of mass burial for victims of farmer-herder conflicts in Benue state.

Table 3. Some reported attacks on farmers by the armed Fulani herders.

Date	Location of Incidence	Nature of Attacks	Source(s) of Information
21 September 2015	His farmland in Ondo State	The kidnapping of Chief Olu Falae, former Minister of Finance and a chieftain of Afenifere – a pan-Yoruba socio-cultural organization	Punch, 'Five herdsmen attacks that shocked Nigerians', 11 January 2015, https://punchng.com/five-herdsmen-attacks-thatshocked-Nigerians/
February- March 2016	10 villages in Agatu LGA of Benue	Massacres of not fewer than 400 persons and displacement of at least 7000 others	Punch, 'Five herdsmen attacks that shocked Nigerians', 11 January 2015, https://punchng.com/five-herdsmen-attacks-thatshocked-nigerians/
25 April 2016	Ukpabi Nimbo in Uzo-Uwani LGA of Enugu	Massacre at Ukpabi Nimbo	Punch, 'Five herdsmen attacks that shocked Nigerians', 11 January 2015, https://punchng.com/five-herdsmen-attacks-thatshocked-nigerians/
10 April 2016	Dori and Mesuma villages, Gashaka LGA	The Taraba State Police Commissioner, Shaba Alkali on Tuesday said suspected Fulani herdsmen attacked Dori and Mesuma villages in Gashaka Local Government Area of the state.	Daily Post, Fulani herdsmen attack Taraba villages, kill 15, 13 April 2016, http://dailypost.ng/2016/04/13/fulani-herdsmen-attack-taraba-villages-kill-15/
24 April 2016	Bornu Kurkuru, Bali LGA	Herdsmen and farmers clashed in Bornu Kurkuru of Bali local government area, leaving my people killed and others displaced.	Vanguard, 13 killed in Taraba herdsmen reprisal attack, 13 April 2016, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/04/13-killed-taraba-herdsmen-reprisal-attack/
August 2017	In a farm in Ore, Odigbo LGA of Ondo State	Gang-raping of a 72-year old grandmother, Victoria Akinseye	Punch 'Five herdsmen attacks that shocked Nigerians', 11 January 2020 https://punchng.com/five-herdsmen-attacks-thatshocked-nigerians/
January 2018	Lau LGA of Taraba State	Raiding and killing of about 55 villagers Lau LGA of Taraba State	Gbenga Bada, 55 feared dead by herdsmen in various attacks, 1 October 2018, Pulse.ng, https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/in-taraba-55-feared-dead-by-herdsmen-in-various-attacks/mbbc6ne
April 2018	St. Ignatius Catholic Church, Ukpor-Mbalom Parish, Gwer East LGA of Benue State	The killing of two Catholic priests and 17 parishioners	Sam Eyoboka, Wahab Abdullah, Johnbosco Agbakwuru & Peter Duru 'Fresh bloodbath in Benue, 2 Catholic priests, 17 others killed by herdsmen', *Vanguard*, 25 April, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/04/freshbloodbath-benue-2-catholic-priests-17-others-killedherdsmen/

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Date	Location of Incidence	Nature of Attacks	Source(s) of Information
16 May 2018	Ukemberagya community, Gaambe-Tiev council ward of Logo LGA of Benue State	Invasion of five villages, killing of no fewer than three persons and burning down several houses, huts and food barns	Peter Duru, 'Benue: Timeline of latest killings after the launch of last military operation', *Vanguard*, 16 June. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/06/benue-timeline-latest-killings-launch-last-military-operation/
23 June 2018	11 villages in Plateau State	More than 200 people were left dead after coordinated reprisal attacks	Inuwa, J, 'More than 200 people killed in weekend violence in central Nigeria', *Reuters*, 27 June, https://af.reuters.com/article/nigeriaNews/idAFL8N1TT2B4?feedType=RSS&feedName=nigeriaNews
11 February 2019	Ungwar Bardi in Maro, Kajuru LGA of Kaduna State	Attacks in Ungwar Bardi by armed herders and reprisal	Busari, K. and Udo, B. (2019). 'How 66 people were killed in Kaduna in two days', *Premium Times* (Nigeria), 16 February, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/313348-how-66-people-were-killed-in-kaduna-in-twodays.html

Source: Enyiazu and Nwangwu, 'Nomadic Pastoralism and Human Security: Towards a Collective Action against Herders-Farmers Crisis in Nigeria'.

Figure 2. Picture showing the mass Burial of victims of farmer-herder conflicts in Benue state. Source: Hameed Sadiq, 'PHOTOS: Burial of Victims of Benue Killings', *Posterity Media*, 11 January 2018, https://posteritymediang.com/benue-killings/; Richard Anyebe, 'U.S Report Says 7,000 Killed in Benue, Nasarawa Herders/Farmers Clashes', *The Whistler*, 24 May 2019, https://thewhistler.ng/u-s-report-says-7000-killed-in-benue-nasarawa-herders-farmers-clashes/.

Notably, these conflicts occurred with security often positioned close to the attacks without acting, and in some cases, where there is a prior report of a looming attack, the security forces do to prevent the occurrence.[89] The reason attributed for the conflict is mainly desertification and has been responsible for the migration of Fulani herders from the Sahel region, particularly Mali, Niger, and the Chad Republic through the northern borders of Nigeria into the hinterlands.[90] The movement of the Fulani herders through the northern corridors of Nigeria is usually unregulated due to cross-border relations defined by Fulani ethnic identity and Islamic religion. The frontiers in which groups of Fulani people are settled, they are considered as the extension of their territorial frontiers no matter the country they are coming from. The Fulani ethnic group in the receiving country such as Nigeria does not exclude their foreign ethnic affiliates. With open arms, they receive and offer them equal opportunities enjoyed by indigenous Fulani people in the country. The uncontrolled movements of the Fulani herders create the environment for ungoverned spaces, which they among other violent non-state actors emerge to perpetrate violence usually along the fault lines of ethnic and/or religious affiliations. The violent expression of identity comes about as a response to perceived insecurity or the need to exercise racial, ethnic, and/or religious dominance over ethnic natives.

Even though death has been the conflict between Fulani herders and farmers in different states in Nigeria, their actions have been justified. The Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeder Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) has claimed that

in states where anti-open grazing law was instituted, '… the attacks [by the Fulani herders] are likely reprisals for the loss of over 1000 Fulani people and over 2 million cattle in attacks carried out by state-sponsored militias'.[91] Some other Fulani herders have claimed that land spaces and routes across the country allocated by the national government for grazing of cattle have been taken by the farmers who deny them access in contemporary time. This situation explains why Fulani herders attack farmers. On the other hand, farmers have claimed that Fulani herders are a transhumant population who have no right of ownership in their respective communities. Therefore, it is an albatross to allow Fulani herders to graze on their land while also destroying their sources of livelihood.

In asserting their rights to belonging, Fulani herders have cited Section 41 (1) of the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (As Amended) to assert their freedom of movement and quest to reside in any part of Nigeria.[92] They have also relied on the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol of 1998, the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Goods and Persons in West Africa, the Regulations of Transhumance between ECOWAS Member-States of 2003 and the ECOWAS Strategic Plan for the Development and Transformation of the Livestock Sector to justify their movements across frontiers of states within West Africa.[93]

The intensity of the conflict increased with the emergence of President Buhari as the Nigerian president. Fulani herders have continued to graze cattle indiscriminately on farmlands belonging to ethnic natives and attacking villages, killing and maiming people without any serious action by the government of Nigeria to assert authority to provide security for the affected people created the negative impression, which further escalated the conflict between Fulani herders and farmers in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria have escalated and assumed a dangerous dimension similar to the threat posed by Boko Haram insurgency. In fact, herder-farmer conflicts have killed more persons and displaced more people than Boko Haram insurgency within the last decade. The escalation of herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria is associated to desertification-induced migration of Fulani herders to Nigerian savannah region for survival. The failure of the state to ensure security governance in Nigeria facilitates irregular migration of armed herders as well as intensifies competition for land resources and herder-farmer conflicts. The state failure to mitigate the conflicts has gained an ethnic coloration since 2015, when Mahammadu Buhari, who is of Fulani ethnic group, became the President of Nigeria. Increasingly, the majority of Nigerians perceived that the Fulani herders are exploiting the vantage of a member of their ethnic group as

the President of Nigeria to facilitate their irregular migration with their cattle without any checkmate at the borders in Northern Nigeria. The upsurge of clandestine complex networks across international boundaries makes it possible for information related to internal and cross-border security governance to infiltrate. Such networks also provide the territorial spaces for accommodating Fulani herders from other countries in border communities inside Nigeria's territorial spaces from where they strategize and launch attacks on specified or random targets. It would appear that state failure to caution the effects of desertification and provide effective security governance, especially in northern Nigeria are the major triggers of irregular migration and conflict between the agrarian and pastoralist groups in Nigeria. The study concludes that massive afforestation programmes in the arid and semi-arid regions and effective capacity for security governance in Northern Nigeria are relevant for finding a lasting solution to herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria.

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